6.9 Cultural differences in relationships

WHY STUDY CROSS-CULTURAL DIFFERENCES IN RELATIONSHIPS?

Moghaddam et al. (1993) point out many differences between Western and non-Western cultures that can profoundly affect the nature of relationships. Hui and Triandis's (1986) 'individualistic' and 'collectivistic' dichotomy, as well as Hsu's (1983) distinction between 'continuous' and 'discontinuous' societies, illustrate some of these differences and their effects.

WESTERN CULTURES

Western cultures tend to be more:

- **Individualistic** – emphasizing the individual, their goals, rights, attitudes and needs. As a consequence there is:
  - A focus on first acquaintances, close friendships and intimate partnerships between two individuals.
  - A strong social norm of monogamous relationships and marriages (reflected in the society's laws).
  - An emphasis on voluntary choice in relationships due to:
    - The Western lifestyle of high mobility and easy long-distance communication, giving greater availability of relationships.
    - The notion of romantic love – that choosing a perfect match whom you love deeply is necessary to fulfill one's own needs.
  - A tendency for relationship interactions to be more governed by individual, economic-based resource allocation and voluntary reciprocity (the returning of favours based on individual responsibility).

- **Discontinuous** – youth and progress are emphasized and change is regarded as both important and inevitable. Consequently:
  - There may be an increase in the preference for temporary relationships and increased rates of divorce.
  - Rules in relationships may be less important, since if they are broken the relationships can be left and others found.

NON-WESTERN CULTURES

Non-Western cultures tend to be more:

- **Collectivistic** – emphasizing the group, its decisions, attitudes, needs and one's duties towards it. As a consequence there is:
  - More emphasis on long-term kinship and social group relationships, often involving more than two people.
  - A higher frequency of polygamous relationships and marriages (reflected in the society's laws).
  - A lack of voluntary choice in relationships due to:
    - More stationary lifestyles, with less long-distance communication, leading to less availability.
    - Obligations to family and social norms. Marriage is supposed to take into account the wishes of others and is frequently arranged.
  - A tendency for relationship interactions to be more governed by group need or equality-based resource sharing and obligatory reciprocity (the returning of favours as an important social responsibility).

- **Continuous** – showing a concern for heritage, customs, tradition and respect for the wishes of one's elders. Consequently:
  - Change is viewed with suspicion, perhaps leading to greater stability in relationships.
  - Rules in relationships are strictly and formally adhered to because of the need to maintain long-term, stable relationships.

Evaluation

- The research on Western relationships has seriously restricted implications for non-Western societies and has neglected certain kinds of relationship in its own society, e.g. the more collectivistic relationships of rural communities and relationships with family members. However, due to the greater worldwide media control of Western nations, their cultural values are increasingly affecting non-Western values.
  - There is a Western (ethnocentric) tendency to assume that Western relationships are superior due to ideological reasons. However, cross-cultural study of relationships points out reasons for their frequent failure in Western societies – the individualistic values of independence, satisfaction of personal needs and personal control inherently conflict with the intimacy, sharing and compromise demanded by relationships, making them more difficult to maintain. In collectivistic societies the norms of dependency, sharing and lack of personal control aid the maintenance of relationships. Gupta and Singh (1982), for example, found that newly-weds in India who married out of love reported more intense feelings of love than those from arranged marriages. However, this pattern had reversed after five years and became more exaggerated after ten years.
  - Studies have revealed similarities across cultures, however, for example in terms of feelings of sexual jealousy (although it may be triggered and expressed in different ways) and the notion of romantic love (although it may vary in commonness).